



WHERE VAULT WAS 'OPENED' Jack James, a Bank of America official, looks through hole cut in vault of West Hollywood branch by burglars. Some reinforcement bars have been replaced by workmen.
Times photo by Jack Carrick

SAFETY BOXES BROKEN OPEN

Power-Tool Bank Burglars Crack Vault, Steal \$70,000

Burglars power-hammered through a 16-inch, steel-reinforced concrete wall to loot a West Hollywood bank branch of more than \$70,000, it was discovered Monday.

Employees reporting for work at the Bank of America branch at 7155 Santa Monica Blvd. found the vault broken into and the adjacent area littered with rubble and abandoned tools and equipment.

Sheriff's detectives said the burglary took place some time between late Friday night and early Monday morning.

Bank officials said the burglars took \$70,000 in cash and broke open 20 safety deposit boxes. Full amount of the loot taken won't be known until box renters list their losses, executives said.

Investigators said the burglary must have involved several men and taken several hours. They said there was no alarm on the men's room window through which the gang originally gained access.

Crime Reconstructed

Detectives reconstructed the crime this way:

The gang apparently used a truck to bring equipment up an alley at the rear of the bank. They used hacksaws to cut through bars on a grille on the lavatory window, moved equipment inside, then put the bars back into place with black tape so it would appear the grille hadn't been disturbed.

Among equipment brought into the bank was a 120-pound electric hammer—similar to the pneumatic jackhammers used by street-repair crews, but quieter — plus heavy sledges and pry bars.

The electric hammer was used to cut a 20-inch hole in the thick interior wall separating the vault from the rest of the bank. This also provided access to the safety deposit boxes, which were pried open.

Tools Left Behind

Taking the loot with them — but leaving behind the tools—the men exited through the same alley window, again taping the bars to hide signs of the forced entry.

"It was the first successful bank burglary in recent history—for our bank," a Bank of America official said. "Jobs like this are very rare.

"The most recent case, statewide, was on Sept. 19, 1966, at the Visitacion Valley branch in the San Francisco area. It was very similar to this one. They came in through the wall and got \$58,000 in cash."